

Maintaining Relevance: Cultural Diversity and the case for Public Service Broadcasting

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ABSTRACT

SBS has been the subject of some heated debates about funding models, commercial activity, perceived 'populism' and the continued relevance of publicly funded media. These debates and challenges are not unique to SBS or to Australia. Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) in many contexts is facing a 'crisis of legitimacy' as it struggles to retain audiences in the face of new technologies, rapidly globalising media, and the rejection of traditional patterns of media usage, particularly among younger generations. Debates around commercialism and the role of PSB in the market also continue in Europe, despite the plurality of models and funding arrangements. Public broadcasters have faced accusations of irrelevance. This is particularly the case in relation to cultural diversity, as old models of representation, universalism of access and nation-building are unable to keep pace with increasingly complex and diversifying societies.

There is a tendency in debates around PSB to conflate traditional public broadcasting with the public sphere and all its assumed virtues of strong citizenship, public debate and informed commentary addressing a 'citizenry', and to contrast this with bland commercial offerings and individualist consumerism (Barnett, 2003). The public service and market models are based, as least in terms of the funding and business models, on different views of the audience, but how different are the content, schedule and services provided under the two frameworks?

Views of the role of public service broadcasting can be grouped into three main camps:

- *Market failure – characterised as 'liberalism with a human face', allowing for a place for 'unpopular' services and the notion that not all niches are profitable;*
- *Quality and diversity of voices – in which the perceived public interest is served by content of a range or calibre higher than that produced for profit;*
- *Public value and democratic principles – the vision of a desired public culture, greater participation in public life and genuine cultural pluralism*

Cultural diversity and increasingly complex relationships between citizens and national public life have the potential, along with other forms of fragmentation amongst contemporary audiences, to pose one of biggest challenges to public broadcasting in all these models. If not managed effectively and engaged with creatively, claims to 'public value', legitimacy and relevance, as well as claims on public funds, are undermined.

INTRODUCTION: CURRENT DEBATES AROUND SBS

SBS is the subject and protagonist of some key stories of Australian self-definition. Long heralded as a 'bold experiment' and understood as 'special' for its unique Charter and the extraordinary diversity of the content it broadcasts, SBS has outlived all other multicultural institutions created amongst the radical social policy changes of the 1970s. SBS was set up to communicate with and represent the diversity of Australia's society, and recognised the range of cultural groups residing in Australia as a part of the national citizenry.

In recent years, SBS has been the subject of heated public debates which have been simmering over the relationship of public policy to multicultural society and the purpose of public service broadcasting. The previous Coalition Federal Government distanced itself from multicultural policy, and emphasised centralist, functional and economic models of citizenship, integration and 'productive diversity' rather than the 'softer' policies of access and equity or culturally relevant services. In the midst of all this sat SBS. One of the last surviving multicultural organisations, with the out-of-favour term 'multicultural society' embedded in its Charter, the broadcaster was positioned somewhat uncomfortably. It would appear that the 'bold experiment' was losing favour.

Change, commercial activity and controversy

Since 2005, SBS has made significant changes which have demonstrated it is prepared to be entrepreneurial and to seek efficiencies and greater opportunities to extend its revenue streams. These have included the full outsourcing of production (except for news and sport); increasingly proactive relationships with sponsors and, most controversially, changes to the placement of breaks in programs. Along with these structural and operational changes, there has been an increased emphasis on 'relevance' as a key priority for the organisation, to be measured and evidenced primarily by ratings. Managing Director Shaun Brown has placed an emphasis on the part of the SBS Charter's principal function that directs the organisation to provide services *'for all Australians'*, and has sought to create programming on television that is likely to appeal to larger audiences, in order, he says, to ensure more Australians feel that SBS offers 'something for them'.

Some commentators and critics have cited changes at the broadcaster as being representative of a wholesale departure from the values of public broadcasting. The commercial activity, new sense of populism, the drive for larger audiences and the emphasis on broadcasting for 'all Australians' have raised concerns amongst media commentators and some vocal stakeholders. Alongside this, the engagement with new genres of content such as reality formats, quiz shows, car shows and more English language content in prime time have all raised questions about the distinctiveness of SBS services and whether a public service broadcaster should be funded to broadcast material that, on the face of it, feels somewhat more like commercial content than 'worthy' ethnic broadcasting.

SBS argues it must be allowed to reinvent itself, to find new ways of delivering on its Charter which are engaging and attractive to audiences. After all, multicultural society is not static, and many younger culturally and linguistically diverse Australians are largely disinterested in old models of multiculturalism and cultural representation. Managing Director Shaun Brown emphasises the fact that SBS's commercial activity directly funds local content and better services instead of enriching shareholders and

is essential to sustaining the broadcaster and serving the Charter.

These debates and challenges are not unique to SBS or to Australia. Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) in many contexts is facing a 'crisis of legitimacy' as it struggles to retain audiences in the face of new technologies, rapidly globalising media, and the rejection of traditional patterns of media usage, particularly among younger generations. Debates around commercialism and the role of PSB in the market also continue in Europe, despite the plurality of models and funding arrangements. Public broadcasters have also faced accusations of irrelevance. This is particularly the case in relation to cultural diversity, as old models of representation, universalism of access and nation-building are unable to keep pace with increasingly complex and diversifying societies.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE MARKET

'Ideology, not technology (as is sometimes claimed), will determine the fate of public service broadcasting' (Jakubowicz, 2007 p.115)

According to the Recommendations on Public Service Broadcasting, adopted by the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe in January 2004, public service broadcasting is under threat. It is challenged by political and economic interests, increasing competition from commercial media, media concentration, globalisation, new technologies and financial difficulties. The purpose, value and continuing relevance of the public broadcasting model has long been debated internationally. This has recently crystallised around the value of regulation for the 'public interest' in a contemporary media context. Can the market now entirely provide what public or state broadcasters did in the era of their monopoly, or oligopoly, of the airwaves?

In their analysis of Dutch public broadcasting Bardoel and van Cuilenburg noted that "To make the media take on their democratic and cultural mission, governments will have to intervene through policy measures whenever the market proves to be failing" (De Bens, 2007). This was supported by the UK Independent Review Panel's rationale for public service broadcasting, which claimed: "the second principle is that some form of market failure must lie at the heart of any concept of public service broadcasting. Beyond simply using the catch-phrase that public service broadcasting must 'inform, educate and entertain,' we must add 'inform, educate and entertain *in a way that the private sector, left unregulated, would not do*'" (*The Future Funding of the BBC...* 1999, p.10)

Public Value

The BBC, in their *Building Public Value* white paper prepared for the 2006 Charter Review, claimed a much loftier place for public service broadcasting than the 'market failure' position. They claimed that public service broadcasting generated 'social capital' because "a programme may make me more likely to vote, or to look at my neighbour in a more positive light. Public value is a measure of BBC's contribution to the quality of life in the UK". Catherine Orton, Strategy Analyst and Public Value Test Coordinator at the BBC Trust claims that public value tests are useful because "it is no longer appropriate to claim that public service broadcasters are simply filling a market void. It should not be the role of public service broadcasters simply to absorb the functions other media organisations will not pursue because they are not viable." (Catherine Orton interview 29 June 2007). The BBC has argued that 'public value' is a much better measure and is needed to justify a broader service of public interest and contribution to media overall, because "...public goods like broadcasting or

national defence or clean air are not handled well by conventional markets. To be delivered efficiently to those who would benefit from them – which, by definition, is the whole population – they require public intervention”. BBC’s *Building Public Value*

This position has been supported by policy makers in Europe. According to the European Parliament’s *Audiovisual Media Without Frontiers Directive* 2007:

Audiovisual media services are as much cultural services as they are economic services. Their growing importance for societies, democracy – in particular by ensuring freedom of information, diversity of opinion and media pluralism – education and culture justifies the application of specific rules to these services.

The 2007 Directive draws from the resolutions of the UNESCO *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (adopted by the European Parliament in April 2006) which states “*cultural activities, goods and services have both an economic and a cultural nature, because they convey identities, values and meanings, and must therefore not be treated as solely having commercial value.*”

The evolution of public service broadcasting

There is a tendency in these debates to conflate traditional public broadcasting with the public sphere and all its assumed virtues of strong citizenship, public debate and informed commentary addressing a ‘citizenry’, and to contrast this with bland commercial offerings and individualist consumerism (Barnett, 2003). The public service and market models are based, at least in terms of the funding and business models, on different views of the audience, but how different are the content, schedule and services provided under the two frameworks?

Despite their perceived role in ‘preserving culture’, public service broadcasters internationally have competed in similar territory, most obviously for ratings, with their commercial rivals. In the UK, this has been attributed to a desire for status as much as revenue, because the financial viability of public service broadcasters do not depend wholly on audience share (Norris, 2000). Despite this, purists have lamented that “today the ‘public’ and ‘market’ models are bleeding into one another” (De Bens, 2007). Increased commercialisation has been seen by many as leading to the perceived ills of homogenisation, globalisation and ‘tabloidisation’.

One set of theories on the evolution of PSB describes it as changing from:

- (i) ‘public service’ in the sense of public utility to
- (ii) broadcasting in the service of the public sphere to
- (iii) broadcasting in the service of the listener/viewer, that is to say broadcasting whose prime purpose is to satisfy the interests and preferences of individual consumers rather than the needs of the collective, the citizenry.

(Jakubowicz, 2007 p.120)

The shift described above may signify more attention to the audience as consumers, and an increased sense that “programmes should not only have quality but also attractiveness” (Jakubowicz, 2007) Costera Meijer notes “There are... few people in broadcasting, including public broadcasting, who deny the relevance of attracting viewers” (Costera Meijer 2005) and adds that the notion of enjoyment has to be added to the citizen- consumer framework. She notes that ‘quality’ is ostensibly the signifier of public broadcasting but questions what happens when this quality does

not coincide with public appreciation: “what then should be the distinctive characteristic of public television?” (Costera Meijer 2005, p.37)

The ‘fundamentals’ of public broadcasting – making quality programs, supplying good information and involving people in democratic culture – are, it is now generally acknowledged, better achieved if public service broadcasters pay more attention to their audiences and consider ‘impact’ as a hallmark of public quality programming. (Costera Meijer, 2005 p.27) The idea of creating pure, ‘worthy’ content in a vacuum without concern for appeal, accessibility or programming schedule has lost traction.

The Question of Relevance

The evaluation of media content in terms of popularity, appeal and ratings, however, tends to raise questions of relevance for PSB. If, in an increasingly personalised media-use environment, audiences, particularly younger and culturally diverse audiences, are not choosing to engage with public broadcasting, the result is a ‘crisis of legitimisation’ (Jakubowicz, 2007). Why should taxpayer money or television licence fees subsidise services used by few, often described as ‘elite’, audiences? Could it be that our institutions no longer serve or reflect our interests (if they ever did) and we as citizens are caring less and engaging with the public sphere only in a series of consumption choices? If so, why not simply allow publics to consume unregulated media and allow the market to pick up any elements of existing PSB schedules as part of increasingly niche offerings?

The European commercial television sector has repeatedly put the argument to the EU that public service broadcasting is no longer necessary, and no longer deserving of public protection or subsidy, because it is producing similar content and similar social and market functions to commercial broadcasters (Jakubowicz, 2007). In these arguments, there is a somewhat ironic alignment of the positions of the advocates of ‘pure’ public service broadcasting, producing ‘worthy’ quality content in the public interest irrespective of the engagement of the audience, and the pro-market lobbyists, who wish to see public service broadcasters operating only where the market has no interest.

The Amsterdam Protocol of 1997 and the European Commission’s 2001 *Communication on the application of State aid rules to public service broadcasting* were designed to resolve the question of the compatibility of public service broadcasting with ‘the principles of fair competition and the operation of a free market’. The *Communication* accepted a ‘wide’ definition of PSB:

...entrusting a given broadcaster with the task of providing balanced and varied programming in accordance with the remit, while preserving a certain level of audience, may be considered, in view of the interpretative provisions of the Protocol, legitimate... Such a definition would be consistent with the objective of fulfilling the democratic, social and cultural needs of a particular society and guaranteeing pluralism, *including cultural and linguistic diversity*. (emphasis added)

Based on this new policy, focusing on pluralism, the EU has ruled in favour of public service broadcasters against commercial broadcasters’ complaints of unfair advantage and anti-competitive regulation.

In its *Building Public Value* document, the BBC refutes proponents of the increasing individualisation of media, claiming that “broadcasting is a civic art. It is intrinsically public in ambition and effect”. This is echoed by the European Science Foundation

which has urged Governments not to lose sight of the public interest in their Declaration of the Club of Nice: “The notion of the public sphere remains vital in this debate and the pursuit of ‘democratic media’ is alive... the democratising and cultural role of the media is the backbone of democracy”. (De Bens, 2007)

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The final role provides perhaps the most compelling argument for public broadcasting in an increasingly fragmented and individualised multichannel media environment and has been emphasised in recent strategy papers developed by UK public broadcasters. It is also tied to an extremely difficult set of outcomes to measure. This argument requires that public service broadcasting is genuinely engaged with the diversity of views and voices in society and provides platform for greater participation in national (and international) public life. The plurality, including cultural difference, must be real, rigorous and credible and the challenge for public broadcasters is to find ways of making it engaging.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING

Cultural and linguistic diversity are key arguments for the maintenance of the regulation of media.¹ They are understood to be poorly catered for in an open market (Barnett, 2003). Internationally, in the context of complexities of religious and cultural diversity and the panics around segregation, mobilisation against the liberal state and ‘home-grown terror’ threats, public broadcasters have increasingly recognized that the assumed national culture does not reflect or have relevance for many. Rather than watching, for example, nostalgic dramas about pastoral villages and vets which tend to be popular with national audiences, urban ‘ethnic’ audiences in countries are spending much of their television viewing time with satellite services.² The fragmentation of the public sphere and the implications of this for contemporary citizenship, particularly in relation to political and religious division, are of concern for public institutions.

The Amsterdam Protocol specifically refers to the “democratic, social and cultural needs of a particular society and the importance of guaranteeing pluralism, including cultural and linguistic diversity.” This reflects concerns that, left to the market, this diversity would not be reflected in media, this is because “not every niche is a market niche, commercial networks only serve the commercially attractive audience groups, not the population as a whole.” This sense of caution is based on the concern that, left entirely to the market, “only a relatively small number of marketable groups will ‘profit’ from television” (Costera Meijer p.2005). This is true, at least, of public television.

Cultural diversity is, then, an important rationale for public service broadcasting overall, as well as a significant challenge for individual organisations. If they do not

¹ See the European Commission’s 2001 *Communication on the application of State aid rules to public service broadcasting*

² Ofcom EMG report 2007

effectively engage with increasingly cosmopolitan societies, there is a danger that public broadcasting organisations will become relics of past perceptions of nations and publics well out of step with the multicultural realities of their audiences.

CONCLUSION

Public broadcasting internationally comprises a huge range of models and structures for funding and public service remits and complex systems of accountability based on varying understandings of the programming's relationship with audiences.

Cultural diversity and increasingly complex relationships between citizens and national public life have the potential, along with other forms of fragmentation amongst contemporary audiences, to pose one of the biggest challenges to public broadcasting in all these models. If not managed effectively and engaged with creatively, claims to 'public value', legitimacy and relevance, as well as claims on public funds, are undermined.

If the notion of broadcasting as a 'public good', worthy of policy intervention includes the valuing of cultural democracy and civic engagement, public broadcasters must reinvent themselves as audience-focused organisations in which the pluralism of those audiences is recognized. In this context, the notion of community engagement and universalism are ever more relevant.

In the long heralded digital future, consumer 'intelligence' technologies and direct to user on demand services may well take the place of the curatorial function of traditional public broadcasters. The reinvention of PSB needs to be based on strategic thinking about what PSB services offer in the age of multi-platform, multi-channelled and customised media. These 'points of difference' are often based in very basic ideas: universal services, public interest, media diversity, good information, opportunities to be part of a national conversation and, not least, the leadership role PSB can take in innovation afforded by developing content and ideas that do not rely on 'proven market success' and popularity as a starting point for development.

Beyond the discussions around funding models, programming genres and ratings, all of which are much debated around public broadcasting internationally, SBS must reflect on its most potent points of difference in the emerging digital media environment. With a fundamental commitment to multiculturalism entrenched in its Charter, yet with national reach and ambition, the SBS model offers a vehicle for the pluralisation of the public sphere, for inter-cultural understanding, and for the development of a more expansive national identity. The challenge is now to find a way of translating this pluralism into new distinctive digital services which maintain a clear vision of their public value and an unambiguous relationship to the SBS Charter.

As Australia becomes an increasingly globalised society requiring new levels of cultural competence, it may be that the SBS 'experiment', cobbled together on limited funds and developed through the 'politically won' moment of public multicultural policy more than 30 years ago, remains the most salient response to the challenge of diversity.